



P. Caron, E. Valette,  
T. Wassenaar,  
G. Coppens d'Eeckenbrugge,  
V. Papazian,  
Coordinators



# Living territories to transform the world

Patrick Caron, Élodie Valette, Tom Wassenaar,  
Geo Coppens d'Eeckenbrugge, Vatché Papazian,  
coordinators

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Agence française de développement  
5 rue Roland Barthes, 75598 Paris Cedex 12, France  
[www.afd.fr](http://www.afd.fr)

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## **Towards a territorialization of rural policies in Tunisia: the example of water and soil conservation policies**

*Aurélie Chevrillon, Naoufel Ben Haha and Julien Burte*

Ever since Tunisia gained independence, the country's agricultural policies, as formulated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries (MARHP), have consistently focused on the management of natural resources in various development plans and strategies (AFD, MARHP, 2015). The approaches have gradually developed over four major periods (Figure 27.1): from construction of infrastructure to structural adjustment and the disengagement of the State in order to empower local populations and cut spending, from very vertical and sectoral approaches to more inclusive and participatory ones. International donors have played an important role in the choice of orientations post the 1980s, with a majority of the State's policies being financed by loans.

Despite these developments, the degree of public participation in public policies remains very limited and functional institutional organizations in rural areas are far and few between. This limits the benefits of State agricultural policies. For example, there is an accelerated degradation of water and soil conservation facilities constructed by the General Division of Planning, Management and Conservation of Agricultural Lands (DGACTA), given the low participation of the local people in their maintenance. In spite of a decent growth rate of Tunisian agriculture since the end of the 1980s, with an average in excess of 3% (AFD, MARHP, 2015), the slowdown in development, with a drop in the standard of living in rural areas in comparison to urban ones and in the country's central areas in comparison to coastal areas, remains an issue of concern.

The Tunisian revolution has highlighted the fact that the Tunisian State can no longer address the major challenges of development and conservation of the natural resources of rural areas without any real involvement of the local populations. In this context, in 2016 DGACTA adopted an innovative approach to the concerted formulation of its new water and soil conservation policy.

		1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2016
Rural policy	Development				Economic development			
	Water and soil conservation	Mainly oriented towards economic development and the implementation of various rural development plans			1983 – Setting up of the DGACTA and the beginning of the water and soil conservation approach	1st water and soil conservation strategy	2nd water and soil conservation strategy	
						Limiting erosion by using flood control methods and facilities (erosion banks, gabions, ...). Use of runoff for domestic, agricultural and pastoral requirements of water of rural populations.		
	Means	Own funds			Own funds + international donors			
Approach	Construction of infrastructure for the most profitable productive investments (irrigated schemes, dams, canals)			Watershed approach Regional management of projects through the creation of CRDAs in 1986				Concerted planning at the territorial level that combines development with water and soil conservation
Effects	Dynamics of rural development driven by a policy of attractive pricing of agricultural products but exacerbation of inter- and intra-regional imbalances Improved abilities and increase in powers of rural administrations			Mixed results of water and soil conservation policies and investments that were insufficiently integrated with developmental support and were not appropriated by the local populations				Expected effects: appropriation of actions by the local actors Improved water and soil conservation

**Figure 27.1.** Water and soil conservation policies in Tunisia: their place in rural policies, changes in their scopes of action, modes of financing, approaches and effects.



In this chapter, we analyse this policy through the historical development of its action and the positioning of the various partners in this initiative – development donor (AFD) and research and higher education institutions (Inat, CIRAD, etc.). This approach is gradually leading all these institutions to modify their respective action frameworks, whose modalities are often unsuitable for territorial concertation.

## **MULTI-SECTORAL WATERSHED PLANNING: A STEP FORWARD?**

The use of renewable water resources, in excess of 90% in Tunisia (AFD, French Ministry of Agriculture, 2011), the low efficiency of their use and unsuitable practices have led to overexploitation of groundwater in several regions, and to the salinization of groundwater and soils. Furthermore, water availability is expected to be affected in the future due to climate change, in terms of both its quality (salinization) as well as its quantity. It is estimated that by 2030, the total water availability (all sources combined) will fall by around 15% (Euronet Consortium, 2012). The intensification of agriculture and certain practices (deforestation, tilling on slopes, overgrazing of 80% of rangelands, etc.) have also led to a significant deterioration of agricultural land and vegetation cover (erosion, loss of organic matter, thinning of plant cover, etc.), exacerbated by sloping reliefs and irregular, erosive precipitation. Such land degradation invites flooding and landslides during heavy rains, affecting ecosystems and threatening infrastructure (dams and roads in particular). This situation has a direct impact on agricultural productivity (reduction of soil fertility), on the environment (most notably an increase in the use of fertilizers to offset the effects of erosion) and on the State budget (increased spending on infrastructure revival).

Funding watershed management was one of the main programmes of DGACTA within the framework of the implementation of its second water and soil conservation strategy (2002-2011)<sup>1</sup>. It was financed by the AFD and the Tunisian government, and its objective was directly linked to those of the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries and of the Government<sup>2</sup> for a sustainable management of natural resources. Through this programme, DGACTA has sought to propose a new framework for action, based on the integration of sectoral approaches at the watershed level and the promotion within regional agricultural services of participatory development programmes such as for the design of concertation and planning processes.

This action framework was designed to ensure that the multi-sectoral nature of the challenges and needs of the territory/watershed was taken into account (improved access to social services such as drinking water and education, natural resource management by the physical organization of the environment, opening-up of interior production areas, etc.). It was then meant to be rolled out through the establishment of organizations of local populations and by their participation in the formulation and

1. The first soil and water conservation strategy was formulated at the same time as the Tunisian decentralization law of 1989 and resulted in the creation of regional commissions for agricultural development. Subsequently, the integrated participatory approach (IPA) gradually became the focus of most major rural development projects in Tunisia.

2. The Xth Plan and, in particular, the XIth Plan (2007-2011) emphasize the objective of sustainable management of natural resources.



implementation of participatory development plans (GDA and CDL). In reality, the expected results have not been achieved. The administration's sectoral organization and functioning, whether at the national level (between different divisions of the Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture) or regional level (difficulty of cooperation between administrative districts), prevented the articulation and coordination of development actions at the regional scale. While the project envisaged participation from stakeholders, in practice this was limited to a single consultation in the absence of factors that would have required greater participation (no consideration of different viewpoints, no shared access to essential information, lack of transparency in decision-making processes and the role of various actors, etc.), and the fact that the decision-making power lay with the administration. Moreover, the low level of institutionalization of the Tunisian rural environment, which was barely considered in the process, is an important factor that explains the difficulty in bringing together farmers and other territorial actors.

Thus, without territorial anchoring, planning at the watershed level, which should have been organized around socio-territorial units, has, in effect, ended up as planning by the administrative sector, reflecting a typically public character of the approach and its still overly directive orientation. The people thus mainly sought to obtain investments that were of interest to them: negotiating for socio-sanitary and educational infrastructure instead of facilities for the physical environment (anti-erosion works, reforestation, small reservoirs, etc.); rejection of such water and soil conservation facilities, and negotiating instead for the implementation of other facilities, most often socially oriented ones.

## **THE TURNING POINT OF THE REVOLUTION OF 14 JANUARY 2011**

The revolution of 14 January 2011 marked a turning point in the attitude of the rural population, which thereafter consciously refused the imposition of any project planning by the Tunisian administration. This new socio-political context left DGACTA with two options:

- a fallback scenario consisting of considering as irreversible the non-validation of the participatory basis of its planning process and focusing all action on traditional water and soil conservation efforts, over which the regional agricultural services had good mastery. But this scenario proved increasingly inappropriate as the project concerned the most socially fragile areas;
- a constructive and forward-looking scenario that called for the strengthening of the dynamics of territorial development.

In this context, DGACTA began preparing its third water and soil conservation strategy in 2014 and a new programme (PACTE), drawing partly on the experience of the funding framework for watershed management. It was a matter of proposing a completely new approach, as much in form (a clear choice of an effective territorial concertation within a decentralization process) as in substance (choice of systemic approaches combining natural resource conservation and economic development)<sup>3</sup>.

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3. These activities will assume the form of development plans (forestry, pastoral, protected areas) defining the rules of use, physical investments, techno-economic consulting services and land facilities.



A partnership framework between the Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture (represented by DGACTA), the French Ministry of Agriculture, and Tunisian and French institutions for research and higher education was developed with aid from AFD in order to support this innovative territorialization of the water and soil conservation policy.

The aim of this new programme is to conduct tests in a dozen territories, ranging in size from 150 to 200 km<sup>2</sup>, to arrive at a better integration of natural resource management activities, by developing and implementing territorial agreements which will cover facilities for the physical management of the environment. The management of natural resources is understood here in the broad sense, i.e., involving not only the protection of resources, but also their exploitation. The aim is also to adopt an approach to integrate natural resource management activities at different scales, from the landscape to the plot. A number of structural facilities, whose scope extends beyond the local level, may involve centralized planning carried out by the regional administration. The programme's scope of intervention within watersheds not only includes degraded agro-pastoral areas subject to erosion, which are the preferred areas of intervention of DGACTA, but also forest lands usually located upstream. At the local level, the territorial agreements will be developed within socio-territorial units determined by the identification of the territories of life, corresponding to the territory in which a given population sustains social relationships, conducts its day-to-day economic activities, shares a common stake in the management of a particular natural resource and/or organizes itself into a group, association or professional organisation (Di Méo, 1999).

This approach presents major advances in comparison to previous public policies:

- it pursues an objective of perpetuating institutional spaces for territorial concertation involving all the actors. The aim is to create institutionalized concertation platforms involving the territory's actors<sup>4</sup> and national, regional and local institutions. These platforms are based on the drafting of territorial agreements which will cover the programme's investment objectives and modalities. A continuous steering of the platforms is ensured by small, dedicated local and regional administration teams (regional development support officers). The concertation body is the territorial committee composed of representatives of local actors (one third), of the administration (one third), of elected representatives (one sixth) and of civil society (one sixth). The approach envisages an association of existing formal or informal local institutions: in order to anchor the mechanism to the territory, it is necessary to take into account the informal structuring of the Tunisian rural space socially built into territories of life, and set up a representation of these territories of life within the territorial committee; at the level of the economic sectors and social organizations, it is necessary to associate representatives of supply chains and NGOs;

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4. Local actors are defined here as non-administrative actors who live or act on a continuous basis and are anchored in the territory, i.e., the local population as a whole – inhabitants of the territory, civil society organizations, actors (farmers, livestock farmers, foresters, etc.) or professional groups of actors (GDA, SMSA) contributing to the development of local natural resources, actors of chains, associations, local elected representatives. One of the challenges of the approach will be to allow the emergence of legitimate representatives of these local actors who can participate actively in the formulation of a strategy for the development and conservation of natural resources. The idea is to rely on existing formal or informal institutions or to encourage their emergence.



- it decentralizes decision-making power by recognizing the legitimacy and shared responsibility of its members in decision-making and in supporting the implementation of plans. Collaborative planning then becomes a continuous and iterative process, based on the gradual improvement of skills and increase of knowledge within the mechanism which, in this way, progressively strengthens its legitimacy;
- it is based on the setting up of a participatory and sustainable mechanism for observation, monitoring of the territory and sharing of information to help the actors in their decision-making and enable them to better fulfil their respective roles in the territory, in order to improve the development and management of natural resources. This mechanism, which can be described as a territorial observatory (Lemoisson and Passouant, 2012, Chapter 34), brings together Tunisian research and education institutions (INAT, INRGREF, etc.) and their French partners (CIRAD, Irstea, IRD, etc.). Through their training and research activities, the latter contribute to the processes of production and the sharing of knowledge and information. The hypothesis is that the production of information and knowledge by and for the territory's actors contributes to the process of territorialization and reinforces it.

## **IMPORTANT CHALLENGES FOR ALL ACTORS IN THE PROCESS**

For the administration, the first challenge is to enable and support the existing skill sets of agents in order to help them develop as versatile managers/facilitators of the concertation process. It is also a matter of equipping local actors, at the levels of their territory of life and the territorial committee, with the means and skills required to appropriate and co-construct the territorial project. This requires a gradual empowerment and autonomy of populations, which implies a major change in the attitudes, both theirs and the administration's. It also requires a change on the part of higher education and research institutions, which normally do not involve development institutions and local actors in undertaking research or training activities.

Finally, AFD needs to accept an iterative and evolving planning process, whose results may be unpredictable at the programme's launch. This approach also marks a break with the traditional distinction between physical investments (water, soil and forest conservation facilities), which are thought to be economically profitable and are therefore capable of backing loans, and supporting actions (agricultural advisory system, training), whose results are less predictable and whose profitability is more difficult to evaluate.

## **THE CHALLENGES OF THE PROCESS OF TERRITORIALIZATION OF THE WATER AND SOIL CONSERVATION POLICY**

A historical analysis of the development of State policies for water and soil conservation in Tunisia by DGACTA helps explain its reorientation towards a territorialization of public action and, more generally, towards a dynamic of territorial development.

Since 2014, the multi-institutional and innovative partnership framework has been working to build a space that brings together the donor, developers, research institutions and local actors in a joint structuring process. This dynamic is based on a strong



commitment from these different actors who are prepared to work in a process that integrates a part of the risk and whose results are not entirely predictable. Institutional inertia and sectoral issues (of the Tunisian State, the main donor and its funding rules, research institutions, French partners), the paternalism of a vertical socio-political organization inherited from 50 years of dictatorship, the many unknowns of an unfinished process of democratization and decentralization, the very disparate objectives of the various stakeholders and, above all, the challenge of placing local actors at the heart of the approach are all factors that will have to be taken into account in the design and conduct of this process of territorialization of the policy for water and soil conservation.

Finally, one of the main lessons of this diachronic analysis is that the legitimization of public action in Tunisia (particularly in the rural territories of the central governorates) necessarily involves a renewed dialogue with local actors and, even more importantly, the recognition by the State that the rights and responsibilities of local communities, as well as their legal and real capacity to exercise them satisfactorily, are at the heart of issues regarding conservation, development and sharing of the benefits of natural resources.

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